

TEACHING CULTURE: NON-VERBAL INTERCULTURAL BLUNDERS THROUGH EXPAT EYES

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century is witnessing a growing movement of people from one corner of the world to another, either for business or personal reasons, like never before. These people will be bringing with them their own differences, values, beliefs, and communication styles. Cultures will clash at the workplace, at a party, in the supermarket, in the subway, when dealing with the authorities, and the list can go on. That is why, this paper aims at providing students (i.e. future employees or managers, who will undoubtedly come into contact with different cultures in their future careers) with notions related to intercultural communication, mainly non-verbal communication. The paper also posits that one way of acquiring the intercultural communication competence in the classroom is by providing real-life examples of what such communication means, i.e. through accounts and stories told by expats, who are people who travel and decide to relocate to another country (embracing or not the new culture) mainly for business-related reasons.

Keywords: *culture, intercultural blunder, non-verbal communication, expatriates, chronemics*

INTRODUCTION

An American working in the USA for a Chinese multinational company might have to relocate for a few years to China. A Canadian woman might fall in love over the Internet, get married to a Turkish man and decide to go and live in Turkey. A Romanian family might decide to emigrate to New Zealand in search of a better life. A Moroccan family was rescued by the Italian “Guardia Costiera” after being at sea for some time and will request asylum in Italy. Or the Syrian refugees will finally land in Germany after escaping the war zone at home.

So many different people. So many different cultures. These people will be bringing with them their own differences, values, beliefs, and communication styles. Where there are people, where there are different backgrounds and ideas, there are understandably conflicts. Cultures will collide at the workplace, at a party, in the supermarket, in the subway, when dealing with the authorities, and the list can go on.

Nowadays, there are a lot of companies offering relocation and cultural assistance. Before relocation, the companies’ HR departments start finding companies offering cross-cultural training services (even online) to help managers

and employees to optimise their experience in their host countries. These companies offer cultural training programmes (including expat adjustment guidance, coaching, cultural guides, customised workshops) not only for the employees, but for their families as well.

Seeing that a lot of employees nowadays decide to move to other countries in order to work for their companies' subsidiaries, intercultural training is a must as the expats' return home rate seems to be high enough. That is why this paper posits that culture and especially non-verbal communication, which is an integral part of culture, should be taught in universities as they might prepare the future graduates for a smoother transition to an intercultural workplace.

RESULTS

This paper is based on the expat stories that were used during the *Culture and Civilisation in a Globalised World* seminar, taught for the 1st year students of the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations at Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania. Starting from the assumption that these students will undoubtedly work in multinational companies with a very high likelihood of travelling, moving abroad or even encountering foreign business counterparts, some real-life cases concerning non-verbal communication in intercultural settings were brought to the students' attention and then discussed.

First, the students were introduced to some cross-cultural information concerning different aspects of non-verbal communication (e.g. chronemics, haptics, kinesics, etc.), which were then put into practice through some real-life stories told by expats. These stories generated a lot of debates, and since some of them were told in a very funny way, the students enjoyed the class and seemed more engaged and interested. At the same time, the idea of using them demonstrated the importance of acquiring the intercultural communication competence.

- ***Culture, Intercultural Communication, Cross-cultural Communication, Intercultural Communication Competence***

Culture, a word deriving from Latin *cultura* 'growing, cultivation' and referring primarily to the cultivation of the land, has received many definitions throughout the time related to both its external (architectural) meaning and to its internal one, as a set of beliefs, values, and norms of a group of people. For example, in their 1952 study, Kroeber & Kluckhohn [8] presented 300 different meanings of culture.

Ting-Toomey [10] sees culture as "a complex frame of reference that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and meanings that are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community", like an iceberg, where the inherent characteristics (values, beliefs, norms) are hidden

and only their external representations (architecture, music, fashion, non-verbal and verbal language) are seen.

Whenever speaking about learning culture and cultures that come into contact with each other, scholars use terms such as *cross-cultural* and *intercultural*. Some use these terms interchangeably [5], although others argue that they must be used differently as they focus on different things. In this paper, these two terms will be used differently, being equalled to the “etic” and “emic” views on cultures. Cross-cultural communication will be related to the “etic” view on cultures, from an outsider’s perspective, while intercultural communication will be regarded as “emic”, from the participants’ perspective being in contact with other cultures [7].

Cross-cultural communication is seen as a subcategory of intercultural communication since the study of cross-cultural communication focuses on the comparison between cultures; thus, it is essential to understand cross-cultural communication before attempting to understand intercultural communication [4]. Intercultural communication, on the other hand, is interaction involving people from different cultures.

And this is why the concept of *intercultural communication competence* (ICC) has emerged as a skill needed to make communication effective and appropriate [12], i.e. achieving your personal goals through communication and using context-specific messages according to the given situation when communicating in different cultures.

Hence, in order to manage to effectively communicate in the context of different cultures, it is imperative to try and understand the other culture and adapt to it. This is why the study of intercultural communication might prove useful as it helps us understand the cultural differences while interacting and provides the right tools and skills to manage them successfully [10].

- ***Non-verbal Communication***

According to John Stoker [9], when communicating, we follow the 93/7 Rule, i.e. 93% of the communication is carried out non-verbally and only 7%, verbally. The non-verbal communication was used by humans at the beginning, having a survival function and helping them to later develop verbal communication. That might be the reason why non-verbal behaviour is more instinctual and unpredictable than verbal communication and why in conflictual situations or in emotional communication, we rely more on the non-verbal behaviour [6]. The following are some types of non-verbal communication:

- Kinesics (Communication through body language)
- Paralanguage (vocal features such as pitch, stress, etc.)
- Physical appearance (height, hair, weight, body type, etc.)
- Proxemics (Distance between people)
- Haptics (Communication through touch)

- Oculistics (Communication through eye contact, gaze)
 - Olfatics (communication through smell – perfume, body odour)
 - Chromatics (Communication through colours)
 - Artifacts (clothes, tattoos, jewellery, body piercings, gifts, etc.)
 - Silence
 - Symbols
- ***Teaching Culture through Expat Stories***

This paper presents accounts and stories of expatriates coming into contact with a different culture and recounting their own feelings, sometimes in a funny way. Expatriates (international businesspeople) are different than tourists and immigrants since they usually spend between six months and five years in a foreign country with a purpose in mind (mainly business), having the intention to return home.

Many expatriates take their families with them in this cultural endeavour, which makes cultural adaptation even harder as they have to juggle both their new businesses and their family acclimatisation issues as spousal dissatisfaction is one of the main reasons for returning home [11].

The type of non-verbal communication chosen for discussion was chronemics. Chronemics refers to the way time is perceived and managed (i.e. pauses, punctuality) and is part of the non-verbal communication process. It was decided to take each continent and, therefore, each culture, and to present it to the students by means of cross-cultural cards depicting the manner in which each culture views time. The difference between monochronic and polychronic cultures was further emphasised by outlining the fact that monochronic cultures (such as the USA, Germany, Japan, Scandinavia, parts of East Asia, etc.) value time, having a schedule and performing one task at a time while polychronic cultures (such as Arab, Latin American, African and South Asian countries) see time as being fluid and value interpersonal relationships and performing multiple tasks at the same time.

After that, each group of students was given an example of how expats dealt with punctuality in their new culture, opening the debates for solving the intercultural dilemmas that might arise when moving to a new culture.

- ***Chronemics in Different Cultures***

Chronemics in Asia:

Cross-cultural background:

In China, you should always be punctual. Being late is considered to be rude. Meetings always begin on time. Time is seen as an important commodity, more

important than money, i.e. as gold, as expressed by the following Chinese proverb: 寸光阴一寸金, 寸金难买寸光阴, meaning “An inch of time is an inch of gold, but an inch of time cannot be purchased for an inch of gold”.

Expat Story 1:

On her webpage Touchchinese.com, specialised in teaching Chinese to foreigners, Chloe Cao [2] also touches on the topic of time and numbers which seem to be intertwined for the Chinese. She gives the example of Ana, a Brazilian living in China, who had been invited to a birthday party for a one-year-old baby, a party that was to start at 11:58 am in a restaurant. Ana thought this specific time seemed strange and amusing because she had never been asked to go to a party at this specific time in Brazil.

However, obviously, Ana did not arrive until 12:10 pm on that day and she had already missed the beginning part of the party. She was late because the party had started at that specific time — 11:58 am. Ana was upset because she did not understand the difference between how China and Brazil view time, because in Brazil, it was a very normal thing to get to a party a little late.

“Why Ana was late? Perhaps it is because she did not understand Chinese people’s strong pursuit of an auspicious number. In most Chinese people’s minds, the number 8 is a really good number, which means “prosper” and “wealth” because the pronunciation of 8 is “bā”, which is similar to the pronunciation of wealth “发 fā”. Because of this special link, Chinese people who want to seek good luck and wealth like to choose a specific time on purpose, like 10:18, 10:58, 11:18, 11:58 to start an important ceremony, such as a birthday party, a wedding ceremony, an opening ceremony, etc., and the ceremony will surely start at that time. If you miss that time, you miss the most important part of the event.”

(Adapted from <https://www.touchchinese.com/learn-chinese-online/punctual-in-china-numerical-culture.html>)

Chronemics in South America:

Cross-cultural background:

The Brazilians, with the “life’s a beach” attitude, consider arriving on time at a social gathering as a rude thing to do. In his book, *Brazilian Adventure*, Peter Fleming, renowned Ian Fleming’s brother, wrote that “a man in a hurry will be miserable in Brazil” since “Delay in Brazil is a climate. You live in it, you can’t get away from it. There is nothing to be done about it. It should, I think, be a source of pride to the Brazilians that they possess a natural characteristic that is absolutely impossible to ignore. No other country can make this boast” [3].

Expat Story 2 :

Lucy Bryson, an Englishwoman moving from Manchester to Rio de Janeiro, recounts her story [1] related to the Brazilian punctuality. Being invited to a barbecue (*churrasco*) by a Brazilian friend, she had arrived at the friend's house a couple of minutes after the time she was told to arrive, but was received with a startled welcome.

“Wrapped in a towel and dripping wet from the shower, she gestured at the living room full of bags of food shopping and piles of possible outfits, and half-jokingly said, ‘Ainda nao estou pronta!’ – ‘I’m not ready yet!’”

What is more, Lucy was appalled to see that only after an hour from the meeting time, people were starting to arrive as this is the norm in Brazil, and especially more so in Rio.

“It is a lesson I learned the socially awkward way at that first *churrasco*, and it is one I never forgot during my nine years in Rio. In fact, I soon became a dab hand at arriving fashionably late, to the extent that I would frequently arrive later than my Carioca friends, who would tap their wrists in pretend annoyance and say “*virou Brasileira*” – “you’ve turned Brazilian”.

(Adapted from <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20180729-why-brazilians-are-always-late>)

CONCLUSIONS

In such a globalised world, when people from different cultures move from country to country and do business together, business people, in particular, find themselves in front of a big challenge: how to overcome cultural-related differences? How important are they? How do they impact the way of doing business and the business targets?

This paper has therefore emphasised the importance of teaching elements of culture in universities, especially those related to non-verbal communication, that will impact the future managers' and employees' careers.

It has also posited the fact that in order to acquire such an intercultural competence (seen as a skill needed to make communication effective and appropriate in cultural contexts), students have to be able to learn non-verbal elements through real-life situations presented as stories and accounts told by expats who have experienced the culture shock and are the living proof of how important overcoming these cultural barriers really is.

The paper has also postulated the fact that by learning about these non-verbal cultural differences at the university, the future employees will have already

absorbed the intercultural training that is so important to their careers and will save the employers' time and resources.

The conclusions that have been drawn at the end of the seminar were that such non-verbal intercultural training was needed in order to learn about other cultures' non-verbal behaviour and to better communicate and adapt to their standards and life values. The fact that universities can provide this type of "pre-training" was seen as a plus for the future employees' (and, perhaps, expatriates') careers.

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